DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 168 301 FL 010 099

AUTHOR Davenport, Linda Y.
TITLE Elementary School: The Optimum Time for Foreign Language Learning.
PUB DATE Nov 78
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the joint conference of the Southern Conference on Language Teaching and the Texas Foreign Language Association (San Antonio, Texas, October, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Articulation (Program); Elementary Education; *Fles; Fles Materials; *Fles Programs; Fles Teachers; *Language Instruction; *Language Programs; Language Skills; Language Teachers; Program Content; Second Language Learning; *Spanish; Teacher Qualifications
IDENTIFIERS *Ysleta Independent School District TX

ABSTRACT

The teaching of foreign languages in the elementary school (FLES) as an integral part of the elementary curriculum has met with varied success in the U.S., despite increasing evidence that young children are capable of learning to speak a foreign language with less effort and more success than any other age group. The earliest FLES programs date to 1840, and since then, their incorporation into school curriculums and acceptance by communities has experienced dramatic fluctuation in the U.S. in general and in Texas in particular. The Ysleta Independent School District in El Paso, Texas, has maintained a strong FLES Spanish program despite negative trends. The success of the Ysleta FLES program can be traced to competent handling of such problems as community support and appropriate funding, the availability of qualified teachers, the use of comprehensive, updated instructional materials, with supplementary activities that are constantly being evaluated, and the need to articulate FLES with upper level Spanish programs. FLES holds a promise to the student who wishes to become a functioning bilingual upon graduation from high school. (Author/MHP)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED168301

YSLETA INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL: THE OPTIMUM TIME FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

by

Linda Y. Davenport

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Linda Y. Davenport

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

FL010099

November, 1978

Elementary School: The Optimum Time for Foreign Language Learning

The American public of the 1970's is demanding high school graduates who can demonstrate skills acquired through twelve years of schooling. All curricular areas are under attack, and foreign languages certainly have not escaped criticism. The complaint of the student who studies a second language for two years at the high school level and "still can't speak a word" is a familiar cry that haunts foreign language educators. The teaching of foreign languages in the elementary school (FLES) holds a promise to the student who wishes to become a functioning bilingual upon graduation from high school.

In this paper, the background of FLES in the United States and in Texas will be described briefly. Then a successful FLES program, that of the Ysleta Independent School District in El Paso, Texas will be detailed. Finally, several problems involved in the implementation of FLES and possible solutions to those problems will be presented, in hopes that more FLES programs will be introduced and maintained in the schools of our nation.

Background of FLES In the United States

It is a commonly held misconception that the teaching of foreign languages in the elementary school is only several decades old and without a history. However, the first public school FLES program, a German program, was initiated in 1840 in Cincinnati, Ohio. FLES soon spread to other cities, including New York City, where both French and German were introduced in 1854. Spanish was taught in the elementary schools of New Mexico in the early 20th Century. World War I, however, brought a halt to most FLES programs. The FLES programs 1840-1920 were beset with problems that have a familiar ring, i.e., a lack of qualified teachers and a lack of general acceptance of FLES by the public. Nevertheless, this early experience did demonstrate that the FLES programs, when well taught, produced good learning results both in the language itself and in other curricular areas as well.

Following World War I, new FLES programs were initiated in French and then in Spanish. Toward the end of the forties, and in the early fifties, FLES programs began to increase. In 1952, Commissioner Earl J. McGrath became the first prominent school official to propose FLES programs. The Modern Language Association (MLA), endorsing FLES in 1956, established guidelines for administrators and organized the preparation of materials. Although the fact is generally accepted that young children are capable of learning to speak another language more effectively than other age groups, FLES programs in the United States are still not generally accepted as an integral part of the elementary curriculum. It is very possible that those who oppose FLES, or have lukewarm feelings concerning it, will take the "Back to Basics" movement of the 70's as an excuse for its exclusion from the curriculum.

Many serious problems lie in the path of complete acceptance of FLES. These problems present a challenge to those of us who know that if our educa-

tional system is to produce truly bilingual students, it must begin during the elementary school years, the optimum time for learning a new language.

Background of FLES In Texas

The teaching of Spanish in the elementary schools of Texas was first authorized in the early 1940's. Textbooks for Spanish, Grades 3-6, have been in continuous adoption since 1942. Despite the statutory provisions, however, it was not until 1952, the year in which national interest was focused on FLES by the MLA Foreign Language Program and by NDEA that a substantial number of new programs was begun in Texas. Many local communities expressed an interest in FLES, some of them regarding it as a sort of status symbol. Enrollment in FLES increased in Texas, as well as nationwide, until the late 1960's. In 1969, the revised Texas Educational Code provided for the selection and adoption of elementary textbooks for the teaching of additional foreign languages, such as German and French. A current bulletin of the Texas Education Agency clarifies the position of FLES in the elementary curriculum:

> Each elementary school maintains a balanced curriculum offering, including English language arts, science, mathematics, social studies, art, drama, music, health, physical education, and if desired, foreign languages.... The inclusion of foreign languages and industrial arts in the elementary curriculum is encouraged.[1]

Despite this encouragement, however, in the 1970's many FLES programs have been phased out in Texas schools.

---

[1]Texas Education Agency, Principles, Standards, and Procedures for Accreditation of School Districts, (Austin: Office of Planning and Evaluation, 1977), p.34.

Description of FLES Program in Ysleta Independent School District

The Ysleta Independent School District is located in El Paso, Texas, a bilingual, bicultural community. The elementary Spanish program was introduced in the 1940's as an integral part of the elementary curriculum.

The student population of the Ysleta Independent School District now numbers approximately 43,000. Instruction in the Spanish language and culture is provided in grades 1-6 in the 29 elementary schools of the district by 37 certified Spanish teachers.

The following schedule for length and frequency of class periods has been suggested to each elementary school:

Grades 1, 2	15 minutes	Meeting every other day
Grade 3	20 minutes	
Grades 4, 5	30 minutes	
Grade 6	40-45 minutes	

That is to say, grades 1 and 2 receive from 30-45 minutes of instruction per week, grade 3 from 40-60 minutes, grades 4 and 5 from 60-90 minutes, and grade 6 from 90-135 minutes. An exception to the above scheduling occurs in those schools with bilingual instruction, grades 1-3, in which case additional Spanish instruction is not provided until grade 4.

The usual procedure for FLES classes is to provide instruction to students in their own classrooms, which necessitates the Spanish teacher traveling from room to room. A preferable situation is to designate a special Spanish classroom which can be decorated with Hispanic realia and in which additional materials and audio-visual equipment can be stored. Class loads vary from as high as 800 to as low as 200 students per teacher. Some teachers are also assigned additional duties, such as teaching junior high Spanish, or

English as a Second Language (ESL) in grades 4-6.

The elementary Spanish teachers are for the most part specialists, holding teaching majors in Spanish and completing an additional designated number of semester hours of elementary education courses for certification. Most are native speakers of Spanish or have resided in a Spanish-speaking country, and many have training in linguistics.

The general objectives of the Ysleta FLES Spanish program, grades 1-6, based on the four basic skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, with the addition of the cultural component, are as follows:

1. To provide a working Spanish vocabulary for purposes of communication.
2. To improve an existing knowledge of the language in Spanish-dominant children.
3. To foster an active interest in the Spanish and Mexican heritage present in the Southwest and in the Spanish-speaking countries of the world.
4. To develop an active desire in the student to continue the study of Spanish.

Grades 1 and 2

In grades 1 and 2, the listening and speaking skills of Spanish are emphasized. Students learn to use simple phrases of courtesy, expressions commonly used in the classroom, and greetings and farewells. A series of vocabulary units, with content relating to the everyday world of the child, is then presented by the use of dialogs, rhymes, flashcards, games, pictures, posters, dolls and toys. Topics include: (1) the house, (2) the community, (3) parts of the body, (4) animals and pets, (5) children's names, (6) simple actions (stand, sit, run, walk), (7) family members, (8) days of the week, (9) numbers, (10) articles of clothing, (11) the school, (12) foods, (13) toys, (14) weather, (15) time. An introduction to the Hispanic culture is provided by activities

relating to the holidays, such as the 16th of September and the Christmas season. Students also learn traditional Hispanic songs and dances.

Grades 3-6

In grades 3-6, the basis for instruction is the A Cada Paso series (Webster Division, McGraw Hill, 1978). This series, adopted in the spring of 1978, was chosen by the Ysleta District because it is geared to teaching the Spanish-dominant child to read and write Spanish correctly, a skill which was being neglected due to a lack of adequate materials. The textbook is then supplemented at each level with materials which will be discussed below.

The A Cada Paso series consists of four levels, with a pupil's edition, a teacher's edition and a workbook available for each level. A set of cue cards also coordinates with the Level I (Grade 3) text. The author describes the series as follows: "Upon completion of these four textbooks and workbooks, the Spanish-dominant pupil will have received, in Spanish, the basic course content in language arts, reading, and social studies normally covered in schools in the United States during the early elementary grades."[2]

In grade 3, students are taught with the textbook all sounds of Spanish and their printed representation. They also review and expand the oral vocabulary units covered in grades 1 and 2, with special emphasis on dialogs given to the English-dominant child.

In grade 4, training in the four basic skills is achieved as students read, write and discuss familiar topics, such as the house, zoo, time, and community helpers. Special orthographic problems of Spanish, such as the use

---

[2]Conrad J. Schmitt, A Cado Paso, Teacher's Edition, Level II (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978) p.8.

of "B" and "V" are also presented in this level.

In grade 5, students are introduced to verb forms, learning to conjugate and use regular Present and Preterit tense verbs as well as commonly used irregular verbs. They also study the relationship between nouns and adjectives.

In grade 6, readings are presented which include Present, Preterit and Imperfect tense verb forms. Students are introduced to syllabication and written accent marks. The series ends with a simplified adaptation, "Don Quijote Y Los Molinos De Viento" and a fable by Tomás de Iriarte.

Although the A Cada Paso series has been in use for only several months, responses to a questionnaire completed by Ysleta FLES teachers indicate a very favorable reaction to it. The following are samples of comments received:

> Appears to be practical - lessons are geared to border students and are not too difficult or too easy.
>
> The text is meeting the needs, especially the element of oral reading.
>
> The children like the pictures and the size of the book is easy to handle.
>
> To this date, the students and I have enjoyed A Cada Paso. I like the book and we have had many good discussions on the lessons in the book.

One problem that has arisen is the use of the textbook for English-dominant students. Teachers of these students must devise exercises to stress the listening and speaking skills of Spanish. Also, the 5th and 6th grade texts are too difficult for the English-dominant child, especially since, with the new adoption, he has not received the necessary background information in grades 3 and 4. However, this problem could be remedied in school districts with a clear delineation of Spanish and English-dominant students by the adoption of the Let's Speak Spanish series (by the same author and publishing house) in addition to the A Cada Paso series, as the former is geared to

English-dominant students.

Supplementary FLES Activities

The following is a list of supplementary activities used in the Ysleta FLES program, many of which introduce elements of the Hispanic culture: (1) games, (2) slides (3) films, (4) records, (5) field trips, (6) guest speakers, (7) map study, (8) lotería, (9) poems, (10) stories, (11) plays, (12) proverbs, (13) tongue-twisters. Several additional activities, such as songs, folk dances, art projects (Ojos de Dios, seed art, puppets, Piñatas, Mother's Day cards) or reenactments of the Posadas often culminate in Mexican Fiestas or programs in which the entire student body participates.

For grades 4-6, a Spanish Spelling Bee is an annual event in the Ysleta District. Competitions are held in each school to determine the winners, who then compete at the District level for trophies and medals. The Spelling Bee is well supported by teachers and students and fosters an interest in correct Spanish spelling, especially the perennial problem of the placement of the written accent mark.

An additional activity which fosters interest in FLES is the awarding of Spanish merit certificates. The Ysleta District makes certificates available to teachers to honor outstanding students at the close of each school year.

Articulation

The Ysleta Independent School District offers a continuing, sequential Spanish instructional program, grades 1-12. After completing grade 6, the student may elect to study Spanish at the Junior High Level (grades 7-12). An Advanced Placement Examination, constructed by the school district, is made

available at grade 8 which could give the student credit for Spanish I at the high school level and advance him to Spanish II. Those students not electing to take junior high Spanish courses may continue their studies in Spanish I high school courses. Several high schools offer separate courses for "native" and "non-native" speakers to further accommodate students entering with different levels of ability in Spanish. Also, a Spanish V course is available to advanced placement students who desire four years of Spanish in high school. In addition to basic Fundamentals of Spanish, quarter courses in Business Spanish, Mexican Folklore, and Speech are open to Advanced Spanish students.

Problems and Possible Solutions

The following are major problems that have adversely affected FLES programs:

(1) Funding - When local school budgets must be curtailed, FLES is unfortunately not considered to be a priority subject. FLES must have the support of the community, including especially the educational community. The school board and the building principal must be key supporters of the FLES program, cognizant of the educational value of teaching children a foreign language at an early age. Many excellent sources are available which state the necessity of beginning a foreign language in the early years of life in order to learn to speak with a native accent and in order to begin a ten to twelve year foreign language sequence which would truly result in a bilingual graduate. The following are examples of such sources:

> Since it is known that the younger the learner of a second language is, the better he learns it, such a program would begin, ideally, in the nursery school, in kindergarten, or in the first grade - at the latest. Evidence supports the assumption that unless a child is exposed to another language before the age of ten he is not likely to learn to speak it without accent. It can be done by some, but it takes time and grim determination.[3]

> Young children can learn a second language and master the skills of listening and speaking more easily than adults or adolescents. The young, for the most part, are uninhibited and can imitate sounds easily so that, if properly taught, eventually their speech approximates that of a native speaker.[4]

The community should also realize that under proper conditions, the learning of another language does not interfere with the refinement of one's own language or cause other psychological disturbances.[5]

---

[3]Theodore Andersson, Foreign Languages in the Elementary Schools (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1969), pp. 8-9.

[4]Texas Education Agency, "Foreign Languages in Texas - A Status Report" (Austin: TEA, 1973), pp. 3-4. (Mimeographed).

[5]Stanley Levenson and William Kendrick, Readings in Foreign Languages for the Elementary School (Mass.: Blaisdell Publishing Co., 1967), p.6.

Another consideration of prime importance is the fact that since 1965, more than a dozen studies have shown that a foreign language in elementary school has helped children in their general achievement, language progress, high school language work and mental maturity.[6]

(2) Teacher Preparation - When the teaching of Spanish was authorized by law in Texas, there was a severe shortage of qualified FLES teachers. Many programs utilized the regular classroom teachers, whose language competence was varied. Programs for elementary certification with a foreign language specialization were available but not well supported by either the institutions or the foreign language profession. Secondary foreign language teachers may become certified for FLES in the State of Texas by completing a designated number of semester hours in elementary education. However, these teachers also require additional inservice training, as the FLES teacher must be both an expert in the foreign language he teaches and skillful in dealing with young children. It would be hoped that as local school systems make known their need for FLES specialists, majors in the field will be more widely offered and elected.

[6]Albert W. Jekenta and Percy Fearing, "Current Trends in Curriculum: Elementary and Secondary Schools," Britannica Review of Foreign Language Education (1968), Vol. I, pp. 142-143.

(3) Materials - It was not until 1966 that FLES Spanish textbooks were adopted in Texas reflecting guidelines developed by the Texas Education Agency in 1964. These texts were readopted twice. In the spring of 1978, two new textbooks were offered to local school districts for adoption, Let's Speak Spanish (primarily for the English-dominant student) and A Cada Paso (primarily for the Spanish-dominant student), which promise to meet the needs of FLES students. A Resource Manual for FLES will also be available soon published by the Texas Education Agency.

(4) Articulation - There was in the past a lack of coordination between junior and senior high programs and the new FLES programs. No provision was made to place the student at the correct level of study following the completion of a FLES program, generally considered to be comparable to Level I, or one year of high school study. The FLES program should be considered not as an end in itself, but as an integral part of a twelve year language learning sequence.

Although FLES programs have encountered many setbacks, the problems concerning its implementation are in no way insurmountable. It is hoped that the realization that the elementary school years are the optimum time for the learning of a second language will encourage teachers, administrators, and the public to search for new solutions to these problems.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Andersson, Theodore. Foreign Languages in the Elementary School. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1969.

Jekenta, Albert W. and Percy Fearing. "Current Trends in Curriculum: Elementary and Secondary Schools." Britannica Review of Foreign Language Education, 1968, Vol. I, 141-178.

Levenson, Stanley and William Kendrick. Readings in Foreign Languages for the Elementary School. Massachusetts: Blaisdell Publishing Co., 1967.

Schmitt, Conrad J. A Cada Paso, Teacher's Edition, Level II. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978.

Texas Education Agency. "Foreign Languages in Texas - A Status Report." Austin: TEA, 1973. (Mimeographed).

Texas Education Agency. Principles, Standards, and Procedures for the Accreditation of School Districts. Austin: Office of Planning and Evaluation, 1977.